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1966

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Recommended Citation

Holmberg, Ted, "National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities (1965-1967): News Article 31" (1966). *National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities (1965-1967)*. Paper 68.

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Secrecy Hurt Theater Project

By TED HOLMBERG

Journal-Bulletin Entertainment Editor

IT LOOKS as though a federally sponsored repertory theater is going to be based in Providence but the complete plan to bring the classics to high school youngsters remains as much a muddle as some melodramatic plot.

And the muddle is largely the making of those who have been most intimately involved in the project, here and in Washington, D.C.

It began last September.

From out of the fog appeared two men from Washington, behaving like CIA agents and swearing all to secrecy. They came bearing the possibility of a magnificent project. So magnificent it apparently took two to carry.

In short, Providence was being considered as a base for a repertory theater that would present plays to high school youngsters from all of Southeastern New England. The federal government, through arts and education funds, would provide about \$600,000 a year for three years.

Objectives were to provide unemployed actors with jobs, to build an audience for theater and to serve as an educational tool for youngsters studying plays and theater.

Only a theater was to be provided by the local communities chosen. The two men added that "the proper climate for the project should be created in Rhode Island."

Just how this climate was to be developed when everyone was sworn to secrecy remained a secret of the duo who left again for D.C.

Within a week, one of those privy to the information made a speech in Newport and outlined the plan. The project was public knowledge. For this, Charles A. O'Connor Jr., school superintendent of Providence, was criticized by some for his "premature" disclosure.

Apparently the Rhode Island congressional delegation and others had not been properly informed of the plan.

Turn to Page 15, Col. 1

Arts

Lively Arts

Too Much Secrecy on Theater

Continued from Page One

Feelings were hurt. But after the premature (?) disclosure, everyone joined in to secure for the state the federal funds.

Still, there were no hearings, no public discussions. Through the state swept Roger L. Stevens, chairman of the National Council on the Arts. With him was Gregory Peck, Hollywood actor and a member of the Council. They looked at the Trinity Square Playhouse, said little, left.

But rumors now circulated that Trinity, our excellent repertory theater, was waging a vigorous campaign to have itself used as the core of the federal theater company with Adrian Hall, its brilliant director, as the leading light.

At the same time the Albee Theater, once the home of the Albee Stock Company, but serving as a movie theater recently, was bought by B. A. Dario who announced it would be used as a community theater. It is presently showing occasional movies and work is needed backstage before it can be used as a theater again. Estimates for its backstage repair range from \$20,000 to \$200,000, depending on whom you talk to.

So the plot—or plots—thickened.

And the air of cloak and dagger persisted. Providence was still the top town under consideration. Sen. Claiborne Pell and Rep. John E. Fogarty were in there slugging for little old Rhode Island.

Then last week an alert reporter discovered an application by Mr. O'Connor for \$329,024 to begin the repertory theater program for high school youngsters. This time there were no premature (?) announcements.

Instead, there was the suggestion that RISD auditorium be used as a theater and Trinity Square Playhouse company be the troupe around which the company be formed.

Moreover, the original tentative plan for the bringing of 80,000 youngsters to Providence to see plays was cut about in half. No longer was this to be the hub of a Southeastern New England project. Now it was simply a Rhode Island plan.

The report dismissed the Albee as an "old movie theater," though it was built specifically as a legitimate theater, the only one remaining in downtown Providence.

Obviously, there was wide agreement with the Trinity thinking in this submitted request with the plan tailored to

the strengths and weaknesses of that organization by Mr. O'Connor.

Which may not be a bad idea. Trinity is an excellent company, the best I have seen in this country—and that includes the highly touted San Francisco creation of Irving Blau and Jules Irving. Adrian Hall is one of the top young directors in the business. Anywhere.

But somewhere, somehow, shouldn't there have been public discussion?

Or were these plans for a community effort made in some smoke-filled dressing room?

"We took it for granted that everybody in Rhode Island likes and agrees with the request submitted by Mr. O'Connor," Livingston L. Biddle, deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, said this week. Perhaps. Perhaps not.

To show that we are not unique in our confusion, there is the tale that a group of New Orleans businessmen have rented a movie theater for use as a home for a repertory company to be based by the federal government in that city. And now the theater may not be what is desired.

We want a repertory theater here.

We want Trinity Square Playhouse to thrive and to be the core of any federally-sponsored repertory theater.

But it would be more healthy and more promising for the project if the entire affair had been conducted in the open from the beginning. With the community let in on what is being planned for it by those who submit requests in its name and those who receive them.